

Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve

818 acres - Halifax County, Virginia

The Site: The gently rolling Piedmont hills of Halifax County provide the setting for Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve. Much of the preserve was originally owned by timber companies prior to its dedication as a natural area preserve in 2001. The preserve was acquired with funding from the 1992 Parks and Natural Areas Bond.

Natural History: Historically the Piedmont of Virginia while primarily forested, contained open woodlands, savanna areas and even prairie-like openings. Some of these sites were too wet or too dry to support a closed canopy of forest growth. In addition in many places tree growth was suppressed or stunted by frequent fires, caused by lightning or set by Native Americans. The Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve in Halifax County is believed to be one of these areas, formerly dominated by scattered pines, oaks and hickories that grew over a grassy understory. Fire in conjunction with base-rich, heavy shrink-swell clay soils played a major role in maintaining the open conditions that historically occurred at this site.

Unfortunately much of the original oak-hickory-shortleaf pine forests of the area were converted to loblolly pine plantations in the 1970s and 1980s. However a diverse ground layer of native grasses and forbs remain intact in large areas of the preserve. This will permit the restoration of the Piedmont prairie and hardpan woodlands natural communities through time.

The significance of the area that is now Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve was first noted by botanists who discovered several rare plants growing along a roadside and beneath a wide power line clearing near Difficult Creek. Those open areas had become a refuge for the sun-loving grasses and forbs which had been displaced by the loblolly pine plantations established here in more recent times.

The preserve contains degraded piedmont hardpan forest/woodland and prairie-like natural communities that support seven species of rare plants. Some of these plant species are globally rare.

Resource Management: Stewardship activities at Difficult Creek will include prescribed burning, mechanical forest thinning, invasive species control, biological monitoring, and limited public access.

Public Access: This preserve is open for public visitation but very limited facilities exist. The preserve boundaries are marked. Limited parking is available at gravel pull-offs along Route 719 (Allens Mill Rd.). Two miles of hiking can be had using the preserve's network of gated forest fire access roads. The preserve is open from sunrise to sunset.

Compatible Uses: Difficult Creek is well suited for environmental education and low-impact activities, such as bird watching, hiking and nature photography. Some uses are prohibited, including off-road vehicles, horseback riding, camping, mountain biking, and the collection of plants, animals and minerals. Hunting is currently not allowed on the preserve. Pets are allowed but must be on a leash.

Location: Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve is located three miles east of Scottsburg.

Directions:

From the intersection of Highways 360 and 344, head east on Hwy 344. Go east on Hwy 344 into Scottsburg. At 2.1 miles you will cross railroad tracks in Scottsburg. Continue heading east on Hwy 344 out of Scottsburg. At 3 miles east of the railroad tracks in Scottsburg turn left (north) onto Rte 719 (Allens Mill Rd., a gravel road). Head north on Rte 719. At 0.1 miles from Hwy 344 you'll see a blue water tower on your left. At 0.2 miles the preserve starts on the left.

Natural Heritage Resources

Plants

Carolina thistle (*Cirsium carolinianum*) G5/S1
Rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium* var. *yuccifolium*) G5T5/S2
Obovate marshallia (*Marshallia obovata* var. *obovata*) G4G5T?/S2
A marshallia (*Marshallia* sp1) G1?/S1
American ipecac (*Porteranthus stipulatus*) G5/S1
Eastern prairie anemone (*Anemone berlandieri*) G4?/S1
Winged loosestrife (*Lythrum alatum*) G5/S2

Communities

piedmont hardpan forest

For more information contact:

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
Natural Heritage Program
Mountain Region Steward (540) 265-5234
or
217 Governor Street
Richmond, VA 23219 (804) 786-7951
website: www.dcr.virginia.gov/dnh

Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve

